FOR DEMOCRATS TO WIN BACK THE WHITE HOUSE, THEY MAY WELL HAVE TO RELY ON THE POWER OF THE ALMIGHTY. AND IT'S NOT BILL CLINTON.

The

According to Jim Wallis

JIM WALLIS IS PREACHING ABOUT A BIBLE TORN APART. Wallis tells the crowd at the Seattle Pacific University chapel that when he was in seminary, a fellow student took hold of an old Bible and cut out "every single reference to the poor."

"And when we were done, that Bible was literally in shreds. It was falling apart in my hands. It was a Bible full of holes.

By DAVID PAUL KUHN

I would take it out to preach and say, 'Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible.'"

Wallis pauses. "It's like someone has stolen our faith. And when someone tries to hijack your faith, you know what? There comes a time when you have to take it back!"

For nearly two years, Wallis has traveled across the country attempting to do just that. And some would argue that those efforts have begun to bear fruit, as demonstrated by gains in the recent elections. But Wallis, America's leading progressive evangelical, contends that the issue is far larger than any one election, that the Christian conservative movement has remade Christ in its own image. "What's at stake here is not politics or social action," he insists, "but the very integrity of the word of God."

Wallis's book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, spent 15 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list in 2005 and became the catalyst for his budding effort to revive progressive Christian politics. Throughout the book, Wallis argues that liberals have lost touch with the faith that defines much of American life. In the values debate, nearly all of which stems from differing perspectives of religion and moral absolutes, Democrats have traditionally been on the trailing end since the devout Jimmy Carter lost churchgoing voters to Ronald Reagan in 1980. Bill Clinton significantly narrowed the gap in 1992 by winning the Catholic vote, but even with his ability to speak comfortably about faith, by 1996, the gap widened again. Four years later, George W. Bush brought Catholic and Protestant regular churchgoers firmly into the Republican camp. Though the gap narrowed three weeks ago, cutting the GOP's advantage among regular churchgoers to 12 percentage points as concerns about the Iraq war rose to the fore, it's still uncertain whether those gains made up a trend or a onetime event.

It is not that America has become more religious. The Gallup Organization's polling demonstrates that as far back as Franklin D. Roosevelt, the number of Americans who said they attend church weekly — religious Christians — has remained roughly four in 10. But how religious Christians vote has changed. In 1960, seven in 10 Catholics identified themselves as Democratic or leaning Democratic. By 2004, that number declined to 44 percent. Between 1960 and 2004, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that white evangelicals went from favoring Democrats by a 2-to-1 ratio to favoring Republicans by about the same ratio — 78 percent supported President Bush in 2004. Overall, voters who attended church at least once a week supported Bush by a margin of 20 percentage points in 2004. Furthering the divide, religious Christians turn out in presidential elections at a rate of about 10 percentage points higher than those who attend church less than once a week. By August 2006, about one in four Americans told Pew pollsters that Democrats are "friendly toward religion," down 16 percentage points from July 2003, according to Pew's annual report on religion and politics.

DESPITE DEMOCRATS' DRAMATIC GAINS IN THE MIDTERM ELECTION, THERE IS LITTLE REASON TO BELIEVE THE RELIGION GAP WILL NOT BE AS RELEVANT IN 2008 AS IT WAS IN 2004.

Over the past three decades, exit polls demonstrate that religious Christians have tended to become increasingly conservative, while the base of the Democratic Party has become more secular. The outcome is a religion gap unparalleled in modern American presidential elections, one based on church attendance instead of church denomination.

"Here's the facts," Wallis tells the crowd at Seattle Pacific University, "every major social movement in our nation's history — abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, child labor law reform and, of course, civil rights — was fueled and driven in large part by religion. And I want to say to the left, the progressive side: Conceding the entire territory of religion and even values to a religious and political right is the biggest mistake the left has made in years, and they must never make that mistake again."

Do the recent gains mean the Democrats are on the way to solving the problem? Not by a long shot, says American Enterprise Institute congressional scholar Norm Orenstein.

The core part of that Republican base, the Christian conservatives, was not as "ginned up this time," Ornstein says. "But does that mean they will not be ginned up in two years? Of course not."

For Wallis, the narrowing of the gap in the midterm elections was encouraging, but he emphasizes that a religion gap decades in the making can easily expand again. Presidential elections are far more contests of two characters, rather than the national mood, he stresses. In 2008, "it will depend on the Democratic candidate," he says, and "whether the discussion of faith is authentic."

HE LAST DEMOCRAT TO WIN THE PRESIDENCY with more than half of the electorate was also the last Democrat to nearly split the religious Christian vote: Jimmy Carter. Carter has been a devout Baptist for the whole of his 82 years. He lives today in the same town in which he was born and has spent the bulk of his life in the Bible Belt. He remains the pride of Plains, a diminutive town in the deep south of Georgia. To this day, political analysts chalk his 1976 victory up to his Southern heritage. But CBS News exit polling demonstrated that for six in 10 voters, "restoring trust in government" was the number one issue that led them to support their candidate, dwarfing by three times all other issues. Carter's ability to authentically speak to his faith may have allowed voters to find a pathway to trusting his character.

"I think the American people then wanted to believe that their president was guided by moral values that were permanent and unshakable and fairly clear, and, of course, these derive from religious faith, and I don't think it has to be Christianity," Carter says, pausing and looking outward to the damp blanket of leaves covering his lawn. "But I think that's a legitimate expectation on the part of the American."

Increasingly, it became an expectation Democrats failed to meet. As the Democratic constituency became more culturally diverse in the 1960s and 1970s, a reluctance emerged to speak about religion in the public sphere. The party began a new emphasis on tolerance. A strict belief in the separation of church and state progressively became part of liberal culture. But the result, says John Green, the Pew Research Center's expert on religion and politics, was that an almost illiberal intolerance for religion emerged among some active Democrats.

"They offended some of these religious people that ought to be on their side," Green says. "Part of that is just a matter of respect." But after the 2004 presidential election illustrated once

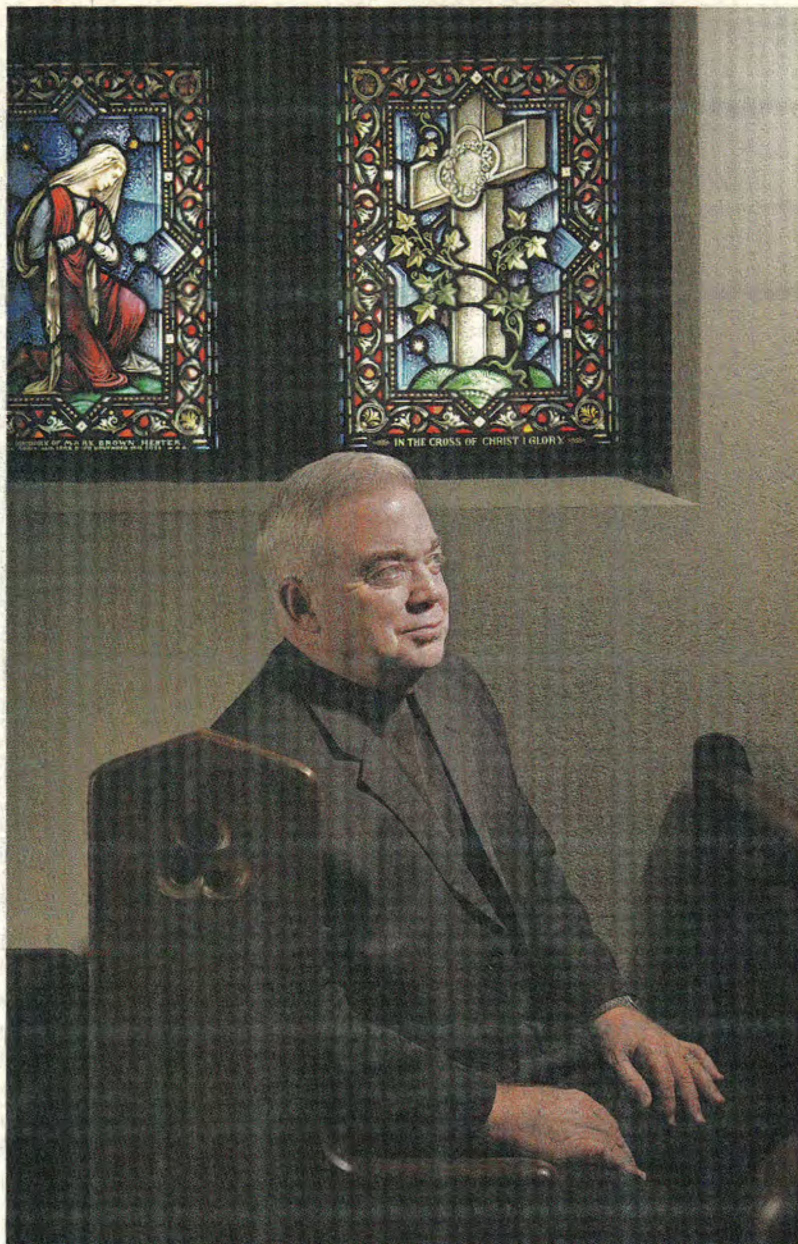
PHOTOGRAPH BY D.A. PETERSON

again that "moral values" were a primary motivator for a significant portion of the electorate, who went overwhelmingly Republican, prominent Democrats began to reconsider their reticence on matters of religion. They also began actively campaigning to dispel the notion that Democrats were antagonistic to people of faith.

"I have confidence that intelligent people: Joe Biden, Senator Bayh . . . and Ms. Clinton — I think they are very carefully considering what happened in 2004 and how they can avoid the pitfalls of being branded as nonreligious and appealing to the moderate voters who were alienated before," Carter says. "I know if they are going to run for president, they are obsessed with this subject."

It is not the sincerity of prominent Democrats' faith that critics such as Carter question, but their ability to translate their religious moral center to the public. Today, about nine in 10 Americans "never doubt" the existence of God. Eight in 10 say prayer is an "important part" of their daily lives. Seven in 10 Americans believe presidents should have "strong religious beliefs," according to numerous Pew studies. But all polling suggests that most religious voters, especially white religious Christians, don't believe Democrats understand their intense faith, and therefore, the core of who they are. "It's a means of making a personal connection between you and all these millions of people you are trying to reach," says Laura Olson, a professor at Clemson University who specializes in religion and politics.

The Democratic Party has three choices in the next presidential campaign, Olson says. "One, you ignore [the religion gap]. I think they've tried that and it failed. Two, you stick to your guns. You say, okay, we're on the other side of the culture war here. We are pro-gay rights. We are pro-choice. That's a problem, too, and the left of the Democratic Party has clearly tried to do that, and that's what they believe, so they should do that. But that isn't going to fly on election night, when you are talking about the electoral college. So the third option, and the only one they are left with, is to try and redefine the debate in their own terms. You've got to take that term 'values,' that term 'morality,' and rethink what it means."



Jim Wallis is the chief executive of Sojourners, a Christian ministry that focuses on social issues.

ALLIS ATTEMPTS TO STAY ABOVE THE PARTISAN FRAY, but has voted only for Democratic presidential candidates and asks congregation after congregation, "So how did Jesus become pro-rich, pro-war and only pro-American?"

"I am political. Sure, I am political," Wallis says. "But I try to be political without being partisan. I don't consult with or collaborate with Democrats on their strategy.

"There are policies right now that the Republicans are standing for — and the administration is — that I'm against," Wallis says, "and I want to see those policies reversed and turned around. But just Democrats' winning won't necessarily do that."

He is particularly incensed by Bush's tax cuts, for favoring the rich and ignoring the poor, as Wallis sees it. And although Wallis may strike a more conservative tone on family values and the need for personal responsibility — he opposes legalized abortion, except when the life of the woman is in danger and in cases of rape and incest, but believes the issue should be left to state legislatures — he is no Clintonian New Democrat. He is less sanguine about the use of U.S. military force, believing his Christianity compels exhaustive efforts for peace before using force. He broke with Democratic leadership over its support for the invasion of Afghanistan.

"They always tell me to offer the alternative to the religious right," Wallis says in Seattle, during his tour of conservative Christian colleges. "My job in life is not to be an alternative to Jerry Falwell."

More than a quarter-century ago, Falwell brought religion to the forefront of the contemporary American political debate. During the 1980 presidential election, under the banner of his newly formed Moral Majority, the conservative preacher rallied unprecedented

numbers of religious Christians to the Republican cause. "When I hear a Howard Dean and Hillary [Clinton] and others talking about appealing to religious conservatives, they just have no understanding of what it is that motivates us," Falwell says. "They mistakenly think that we are Republicans. We're not. I could vote for any Democrat for president or Senate or congressman, as long as he or she was committed to the social issues properly, took a strong stand in the war on terrorism, and national defense. We'd be right there."

The self-described "godfather of what is called the religious right," Falwell is among Wallis's harshest critics. "I've never believed that Jim Wallis was an evangelical. I've asked him on talk shows if he believes the Bible is the infallible word of God — well, that's the cornerstone of evangelical Christianity — and he's never been willing to say publicly that he does. I've asked him the question: Do you believe Christ is the only way to heaven? And he's never been willing to say yes? All evangelicals will say 'yes' quickly to that question."

Wallis, who doesn't accept that litmus test for evangelism, may not want to be a counter-Falwell, but increasingly, he is the most influential alternative.

In January 2005, Wallis wrote a memo on why the federal budget is a "moral document." Democratic Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (Nev.) referenced the memo the following March when he spoke on the Senate floor. Reid recited the biblical story of the rich man who went to Hell for ignoring the starving beggar Lazarus at his door. Reid pledged that if Republicans cut health, education and job training programs, he would "turn this budget into a moral document."

"Jim Wallis, who is a friend of mine," Reid says, "has been a real good teacher for us . . . I think he's made us more socially conscious of the importance of religion." Reid says that when the religion gap was brought to his attention after the 2004 election, it was an awakening for him. "I think, my personal feeling is, we let the right wing take away the basis for religiosity," Reid continues. "It's to make life better for people, not have them vote one way or the other." But Reid says Democrats after 2004 could no longer ignore that their faith led many voters to the Republican camp. He contends that Democrats have changed accordingly. It is not that Democrats have become more religious, Reid insists, but more open about their faith.

"What Jim Wallis has written, what he says every day, what I have written, is going to be at least partially effective," says Carter, whose recent book, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*, was also a bestseller. "I'm not trying to exalt myself. But I'm sure the two books that were written, had they been written five years ago, the [presidential] election may have turned out differently . . . There are values other than gay marriage, blocking gay marriage and blocking abortion, but we've, by almost default, we turned those issues that were looked upon as encapsulating all religious belief because we didn't emphasize the overwhelming portion of what, in my opinion, actually comprises the essence of religious belief."

HE SON OF CHURCHGOING EISENHOWER REPUBLICANS, Wallis was a youth group leader at his parents' church. "And then I began to have these questions, 14-year-old questions. I was living in Detroit, [in] a completely white world. I was listening to my city for the first time. I was reading newspapers now. I was paying attention to the news. I was hearing things. And, how come I didn't know anybody whose dad didn't have a job, or who didn't have a safe place to live, or who had any relatives in jail? Yet all that was happening in black Detroit, just a few blocks or miles away. How come we've never had a black preacher in church? How come we never had a black person in our church? I heard there were black churches, and who was this minister in the South named King? And I couldn't get answers to the questions."

After Wallis spent months trying to get his church to discuss segregation in Christian terms, the elders agreed to hold a discussion on racism. Wallis was selected to represent the black perspective.

"The first question was, 'Well, Jamie [his boyhood nickname], would you want Barbie to marry one?' That was my younger sister. That was the level of response."

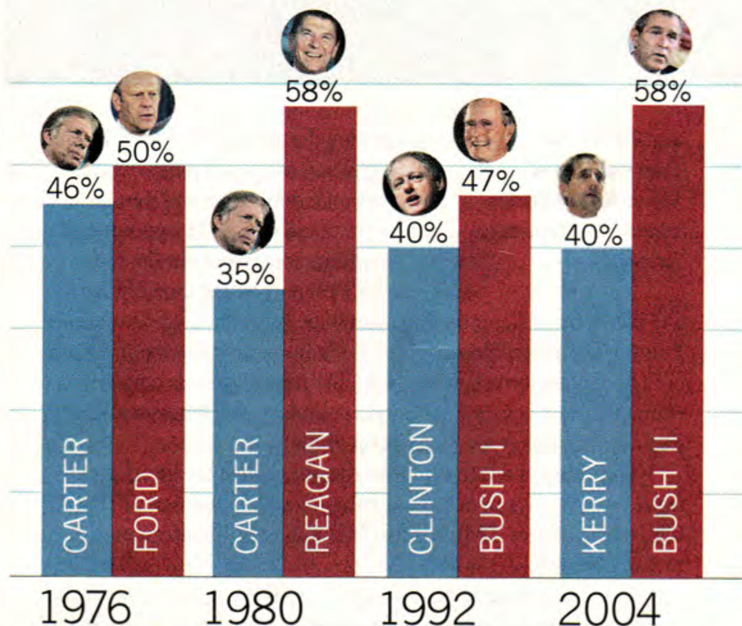
Finally, he recalls, a church elder told him, "Christianity has nothing to do with racism. That's political, and our faith is personal."

"And," Wallis says, "I think that's the night I left [Christianity] in my head and my heart."

Race riots were occurring in cities across America by 1967. Wallis was 19. "All the white world I had grown up in was terribly afraid," he says. "And I was feeling connected to the people inside the barricade." As a student at Michigan State University, Wallis was becoming increasingly involved in the antiwar and civil rights movements. He became fascinated with Martin Luther King Jr. and was listening to Bob Dylan, reading Ho Chi Minh, Karl Marx, Che Guevara, "all the luminaries of the time. And I was not finally satisfied with them," because, as Wallis

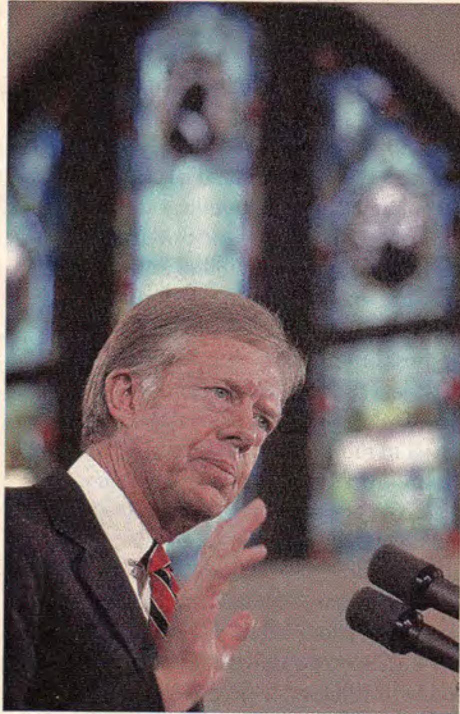
THE GOD GAP

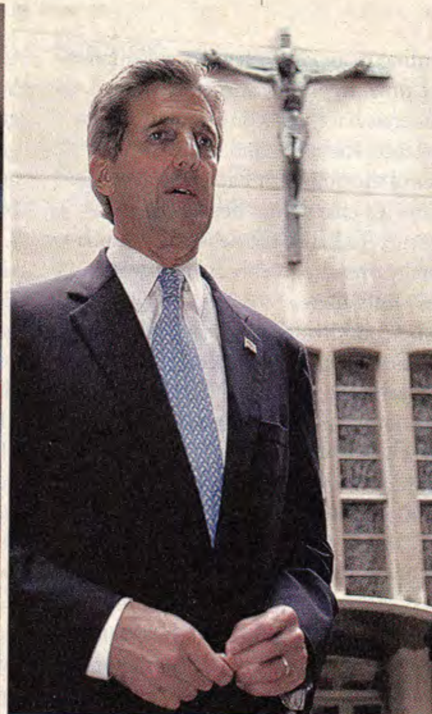
How Christian voters who said they attended a religous service every week have voted for president



Source: University of Michigan American National Election Studies, 1976-2004, as analyzed by Laura Olson, Clemson University.

JIMMY CARTER PHOTOGRAPH BY WALLY MCNAMEE / CORBIS; GERALD FORD, RONALD REAGAN AND GEORGE H.W. BUSH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASSOCIATED PRESS; BILL CLINTON PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS; JOHN KERRY PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN JAFFE / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE / GETTY IMAGES; GEORGE W. BUSH PHOTOGRAPH BY BROOKS KRAFT / CORBIS





From left: President Carter's ability to authentically speak to his faith may have promoted voter trust. Sen. John F. Kerry rarely mentioned his faith during the 2004 campaign, but President Bush frequently did.

CARTER PHOTOGRAPH BY WALLY MCNAMEE / CORBIS; KERRY PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN JAFFE / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE / GETTY IMAGES; BUSH PHOTOGRAPH BY BROOKS KRAFT / CORBIS

recalls, he came to believe that the leftist activist creeds did not speak to the spiritual. As Wallis was finishing college, he found that he could "never quite get rid of Jesus. He was always hanging around in my head and in my heart. So I decided to take one last look . . . I began to read the New Testament one last time. I got to the Sermon on the Mount . . . and I realized I had never heard a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. Then I got to the 25th chapter of Matthew, and that became my conversion text, when Jesus said, 'I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was naked. I was sick. I was in prison. And you never came to me.' And the people say, 'Oh, Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, or naked, or sick or imprisoned?' And he says, 'As you've done to the least of these, you've done to me.' The people who I'd met and were fighting with before were the very ones he was talking about in that passage. So I had to leave the church to find Jesus."

Wallis decided to go to the conservative Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. Within months, he found a group of students who believed as he did, and an early version of his movement, Sojourners, was born. It grew to become a national Christian organization based in Washington, and remains fundamentally charged, about three decades later, with lifting people out of poverty.

Yet for all the attention directed at Wallis, 58 now and married and the father of two sons, fundraising for his organization has not dramatically increased. When I tell Wallis that some of his conservative critics say he is a general without an army, he responds: "I think we do have an army. You don't sell 200,000 copies of a book if you don't have a constituency. We are not organized, institutionalized or mobilized the way the right is. They have been doing this for 30 years."

Y THE 1970S, DEMOCRATS' DIVERSITY was a central component of their dilemma. They became "much more of a patchwork," as Clemson University's Olson puts it. Compared with the relative cultural homogeneity of the FDR coalition of labor, Catholics, ethnic whites and Southern whites, the modern Democratic Party began to focus on "a lot more little narrow constituencies under its big tent," such as the civil rights and feminist movements, which were like "little fiefdoms they had to make happy," Olson adds.

"WE WENT TOO FAR ON THE ABORTION ISSUE," JIMMY CARTER SAYS OF DEMOCRATS. "WE BECAME BRANDED WITH ABORTION."

"When the Democrats became just the party of rights, they lost something, a moral appeal," Wallis contends. The Democratic patchwork frayed as some of its largest constituencies, particularly working-class whites, began to feel culturally estranged from the party. The breaking point was in 1972, when Republican Richard M. Nixon argued that a vote for Democrat George McGovern was a vote for "acid, amnesty and abortion." To many voters, McGovern embodied an emerging perception that liberals were outside the American mainstream.

Pivotal Supreme Court rulings only furthered the emerging divide. Between the presidency of John F. Kennedy and the failed bid of John F. Kerry, the court prohibited school prayer and ruled that pornography was legal and that obscenity was subject to contemporary community standards. To conservatives, this reeked of liberal relativism. By 1973, when the court ruled there

was a constitutional right to abortion, religious Christians were ready to be mobilized by conservatives. But Carter was able to stem the tide of churchgoing voters from the Democratic Party.

"Carter — because he was really one of them — they thought, 'Well, he'll come in, and he'll be able to turn back the clock on some of these scary policy decisions that have been made,'" Olson says. "Like legalized abortion, the removal of prayer from public schools, stuff like that. But Carter couldn't hold on to them. The perception that Carter had weakened the country internationally was especially damaging," Olson adds. "Part of what fueled the emergence of the Christian right was anti-communism . . . [communism] being rightly perceived as godless was very threatening to people of faith."

By 1980, "Reagan is able to identify a constituency that is extremely ripe for mobilization, a constituency that is easy to track down," Olson continues. "The other piece of that is that even though he himself is an incredibly unlikely representative for this constituency because he's from Hollywood, he's divorced, he has not been religious his whole life like Carter, but instead, he's able to craft himself as a viable representative of this constituency just through symbolic appeals."

Reagan's call to get "government off our backs" resonated with religious Christians, many of whom by 1980 saw the federal government as furthering an overall secularization of society.

In 1980, the party platform included the "pro-life plank" for the first time. Reagan also advocated for the biblical story of creation to be taught in public schools as an alternative to evolution. And when it was still uncommon for presidential hopefuls to visit evangelicals, Reagan came and spoke at a convention of leading evangelical Christians in Dallas during the campaign, where he famously said, "Well, I know that you can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you."

Reagan's appeal worked. In 1976, Carter won the white Baptist vote, 56 to 43 percent. In 1980, Reagan won it 56 to 34 percent, according to an ABC News-Harris survey at the time. In presidential elections, Democrats have not won religious Christians since. Richard Land, a longtime leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, says the sea change was deeper than any one issue. To Land, the debate was fundamentally over the worldview that social issues symbolize.

The core divide, Land says, is "whether you believe there are transcendent moral values or whether you don't, and believe most things are relative and situational." It was Land who sat with George W. Bush in Texas on the day of the governor's second inauguration in 1999, along with several other confidants, and recalls Bush saying, "I believe that God wants me to be president." That moment was consistent with a president who speaks in morally unambiguous terms. Bush's use of words such as "evildoers," Land adds, epitomized a belief that there are moral absolutes.

RICHARD LAND, LEADER OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, RECALLS GEORGE W. BUSH SAYING, **"I BELIEVE THAT GOD WANTS ME TO BE PRESIDENT."**

By 2004, Republicans so dominated the religious Christian vote that Bush, a practicing Methodist, won more Catholics than Kerry, who if elected, would have been the second Catholic president.

"What I criticize in John Kerry is I think he felt quite ill at ease within a deeply religious congregation or environment, and there is very little doubt that Howard Dean did, also," Carter says. It was Dean who famously stated that Job was his favorite book in the New Testament; in fact, it's in the Old Testament. Kerry did speak about morality and faith during the 2004 campaign but rarely talked about his own faith in personal terms that allowed voters to get a sense of his moral core, in stark comparison with his opponent.

OHN KERRY IS A MAN WHO STILL BELIEVES he is fundamentally misunderstood by America. He squints his eyes in agitation when recalling how he lost the religious Christian vote to Bush. "I reread the Catholic bishops' guide after the election," Kerry says, referring to the 2004 Catholic voters' guide, in his Washington Senate office, "and you know, I suspect I get about a 95 percent on it. George Bush gets about a 5 percent. Yes, pro-life issues are central, and I understand its centrality to faith, but a lot of other things are, too. Like just and unjust war and poverty and children and our responsibility to the Earth and to each other and to future generations, and I think it's important to put those on the table." But Kerry rarely did during the 2004 election. He'll say, "During the campaign, I spoke about these choices in moral terms." But soon after, he admits, "To the degree there is a gap, it is because we have not been overt and aggressive enough about making clear what real faith is about."

When I remind Kerry that, during the 2004 election, he told PBS News, "I don't wear my religion on my sleeve," he responds, "I think some people on the other side do. I'm not asserting who or what. But it became clear as the campaign went on from there that these issues required discussion." And, Kerry realizes, at that point it was too late.

For Democrats to continue bringing in more religious Christians, experts agree, a key component will be to find a way to "neutralize the abortion issue" by "advocating for the drastic reduction of abortion," as Wallis puts it. To lessen the weight of the abortion issue, one option currently discussed in Democratic circles is the "90-10" push to reduce the abortion rate 90 percent in 10 years. "We went too far on the abortion issue," Carter says of Democrats. "We became branded with abortion."

"It's more than just saying, 'Okay, we are going to reduce it,'" Kerry says. "I think some of our rhetoric — I plead guilty for the Democratic Party — I think some of our rhetoric — mine included — has been insensitive at times to that moral dilemma."

For Democrats to successfully close the religion gap, they will have to contend with opposition within their party, stresses John Green of the Pew Center. "The activist core of the Democratic Party is drawn increasingly from groups of people that are not religious," he says. Self-described secular Americans amount to about 15 percent of the electorate, and most are Democrats. "Some of them are hostile to religion, and some of them are indifferent to it. And that has made it very difficult for them to understand this very religious country in which they are trying to do politics."

Democrats have taken notice. Last

year, then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi began a Democratic Faith Working Group to encourage Democrats to speak about issues in moral and religious terms.

"There are a lot of Democrats who are people of faith and haven't had permission to act like it, talk like it, behave like people of faith," Wallis says. "And when they start doing that, like Tim Kaine did in Virginia, my goodness, it works."

IN 2005, VIRGINIA'S TIM KAINE BECAME THE EXCEPTION that proved the rule. About half of all voters in Virginia are religious Christians. While Protestants make up seven in 10 voters in Virginia, Kaine, a devout Catholic, was able to rebuff attempts to paint him as too liberal by speaking about his stances in Catholic terms.

Since Kaine's election, Democrats have been looking to him for answers to cross over the religion gap. "They must talk as much or more about your motivations," Kaine suggests to Democrats. "If your motivation is a spiritual motivation, share that . . . Put that first, because that matters to people more than whether offshore drilling is a good idea or bad idea. . . . You don't share your faith to make somebody else feel like you; you share your faith to tell them who you are."

But Wallis insists that an openly religious Democratic candidate will win the presidency only when the party's liberal base becomes more centrist on issues such as abortion, more at ease with religion in the public sphere, and able to reconcile itself with the "failures of moral relativism."

"Can you win the majority of evangelicals to change sides? No, probably not," Wallis says. "But you know, the Republicans, they are not trying to win the black vote; they are trying to peel off a percentage of it in Ohio. So you try to peel off percentages of the evangelical vote." But to peel off percentages of the religious Christian vote, Wallis insists, "Democrats have got to run somebody who has a clue about religion, religious people, about poverty, about the environment, and will speak to those people in a moral language, able to talk sense about abortion. That candidate wins. That candidate wins tomorrow in America! Tomorrow!" ◼

David Paul Kuhn is completing a book about presidential politics. He can be reached at 20071@washpost.com.

Hockey

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

recognized her own determination in him and nourished it. "I was very demanding of myself as an athlete when I played," she said. "I always tried to instill in Sasha to be as demanding as I was."

He quickly grew stronger and more skilled at hockey than other boys his age. His parents urged him to work harder still — and always for the team, not his own glory.

"I tried not to praise him," his mother said. "After a win . . . the next morning over breakfast I could tell him: 'You know, you did okay. But right there you made a mistake. And there you didn't skate hard enough. And there you didn't go all the way to fight for the puck. And you were lazy in that episode, so work on that.'"

On September 17, 1995, Alex turned 10. Two days later, his oldest brother, Sergei, 22, who'd been recuperating after a car accident, died suddenly of unforeseen complications. The next day, Alex's youth team was scheduled to play a game. "His brother wasn't even in the ground yet," the father recalled. "We decided he shouldn't skip the game. He played while tears were flowing down his cheeks. He cried the entire game, but he played. He wanted to play. We were obviously not thinking about hockey that day. I don't even know what the score was. We didn't really think of it as a lesson. We didn't want him to sit at home and dwell, and to cry and to poison himself with his thoughts."

Alex was only 15 when Don Meehan, the Canadian sports agent, sent an emissary to talk to the family about representing the young hockey player. Two years later, Capitals general manager George McPhee arranged to meet Alex in a hotel lobby in the Czech Republic. McPhee wanted to get a sense of the teenager, even though Alex wouldn't be eligible to play in the NHL until he turned 18.

To capture the hockey world's attention Alex had forsaken almost every soft distraction of youth. He had done nothing but play hockey. It was a price he was happy to pay, he said. Just being on the ice with his teammates was always, "sort of a high for me," he said through an interpreter. "It's like a child getting his most secret dream achieved. For example, if you always dreamed about a toy transformer robot and you finally get it. That's what I feel on the ice."

Scoring, of course, feels even better.

"You can imagine a situation when you are running away from an angry dog," Alex explained. "You've got a bit of adrenaline in your blood, right? Combine that with a sense of accomplishment, and you've got a goal."

Like his mother before him, Alex began his professional sports career at age 16 with Dynamo Moscow. That same year, he set scoring records in the World Under-18 Junior Championships and helped lead the junior national team to a gold medal. At 17, he became the youngest skater in history to play for the Russian national team.

Russian professional sports are notoriously tough. When one high-profile Russian hockey star complained that he'd been psychologically pressured to sign his contract, the team president famously scoffed that real pressure was when you banged a skater's head against a radiator.

Alex's iron-willed mother tried to shield him from the rough business side of professional hockey. She and her husband helped negotiate his contracts. "I wouldn't trust my child to anyone else," she said.

When Alex was 18, the Washington Capitals, then ranked 28th out of 30 NHL teams, won the 2004-05 draft lottery — a stroke of luck akin to a slot-machine jackpot. Out of all the teams in the NHL, the Caps would get the first draft pick. "We were all excited," McPhee recalled. "I called our chief amateur scout. I said, 'If you had to pick today, who would you take?' He said, 'It's got to be Ovechkin.' . . . We just felt like Alex's character and his physical playing really separated him from any other player we could see."

But labor disputes shut down the NHL. So Alex kept playing for Dynamo Moscow, until he walked out over a dispute about pay and what size apartment the team was supposed to provide the family in crowded Moscow. "If they fooled you, there is no forgiveness," Tatiana recalled telling Alex about the family's dealings with the club. "My credo in life is: One strike and you are out."

Alex's mother, angry at Dynamo and uncertain about when the Caps would skate again, urged her son to go to Siberia and accept a lucrative offer to play for the team in the city of Omsk.

"Omsk is like Pittsburgh," Alex said. "It's not like New York." He went to Omsk. He was living in the team training barracks, but hadn't played his first game for them yet, when word came from Washington. The lockout was over, and the Capitals were hoping their first-round draft pick would